

## **The Positioning of School-based Teacher Educators as Partners in Initial Teacher Education**

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## **Abstract**

In initial teacher education (ITE) internationally there is great diversity in school-based experiences. This research explores how teacher educators in schools in England, working in partnership with a Higher Education Institution (HEI), position themselves and identifies some of the impact that this role had on them.

This study took place in the first year of a new route into teaching in England designed by groups of schools with an accredited provider of ITE. The schools may teach academic aspects of professional and subject knowledge, as well as facilitate the student-teachers' school experiences. The involvement of school-based teacher educators (SBTEs) went beyond traditional mentoring. The research question was: how does taking on the newly emerging role as a SBTE, and developing as a second-order practitioner (teacher of teaching, Murray and Male 2005), impact on the teacher, student-teachers and HEI-based teacher educators (IBTEs) in terms of the positioning and professional learning of the SBTE?

Eight of the thirteen SBTEs completed an emailed questionnaire. From these eight, five were selected using purposeful sampling and two took part in an interview as well as two IBTEs who had worked closely with them. Four of the student-teachers shared their experiences in a focus group. This research draws on a phenomenological approach.

The voices of the SBTEs and those working alongside them, gave a deep understanding of the complexities of this role. There were benefits in working in this way for all involved. The SBTEs commonly positioned themselves as learners *from* and *with* student-teachers and as complementary partners with IBTEs. They were developing a range of complex new skills beyond those required as a first-order practitioner (teacher of pupils) and emerging as gate-keepers of professional learning opportunities for student-teachers and their peers.

Although the research participants are from an alternative programme of ITE, their experience in taking responsibility for more of the academic aspects of the student-teachers' learning warrants attention by policy-makers and programme designers, as there are increasing moves towards school-based teacher education internationally. The results contribute to the improvement of teacher education by raising awareness around the impact of executing the role of mentor and academic tutor simultaneously. Where SBTEs were working as mentors, the tendency towards being positioned as 'mentor', even whilst new aspects of the role were being acquired, could have restricted their development. A job title, description and dedicated time for the role would help to provide a more formal structure to school-based teacher education. Without formal recognition much may be expected of these SBTEs, masking the true cost. The European Commission report (2013, p.10) realised that 'failing to define teacher educators' roles and the competencies they require, and the failure to acknowledge all those who play a part in teacher education, can be barriers to educational improvement and innovation'. Where the relationships between SBTEs and IBTEs are developing as complementary partners, the challenge of sharing responsibility and power can be explored, to strengthen the partnership. This could help to overcome the sense of fragmentation in the community of teacher educators.

**Keywords** teacher educator; initial teacher education; mentor, School Direct

## **Introduction and theoretical framework**

'Teacher educators are all those who actively facilitate the (formal) learning of student-teachers and teachers' (European Commission 2013, p.8). This occupational group includes SBTEs and IBTEs. SBTEs include teacher mentors and those who deliver some academic aspects of teacher education. The literature focusses primarily on IBTEs who have left school and entered academia (Swennen, Jones, and Volman 2010).

In many Western countries there are policies designed to promote school-led teacher education (Musset 2010; Zeichner 2014). These changes in ITE are shifting the nature of partnership between schools and HEIs and may lead to 'local' professionalisms causing a break-up of traditional provision (Whitty, 2014). The European Commission (2013) expresses disquiet regarding the fragmentation of the teacher educator profession because of challenges to consistency and quality of provision. Collaborative working between schools and HEIs in the provision of high quality ITE could be upset as shifts in the balance of power affect the positioning of partners. We are employing the term 'positioning' because it helps 'focus attention on dynamic aspects of encounters in contrast to the way in which the use of 'role' serves to highlight static, formal and ritualistic aspects' (Davies and Harre 1990, p.43). Positioning involves the ongoing construction of self-identity through talk.

## **Research Questions**

'Teacher tutors' were studied during the first year of School Direct, a new route into teaching in England. School Direct programmes are designed by groups of schools with an HEI or another accredited provider of ITE. Schools recruit their own student-teachers and agree the focus and outcomes of the programme. SBTEs may be involved in academic teaching, as well as facilitating the school experiences for the student-teachers. In this programme the SBTEs of interest were called 'teacher tutors'; they taught sessions with student-teachers in small groups or individually. Some had a mentoring role for the student-teacher that they were tutoring; in other cases they were not currently mentoring any student-teacher on the programme. Two were professional mentors carrying the responsibility for overseeing ITE within their school. Those who were solely teacher mentors have not been included in the research so that a direct comparison can be made between these SBTEs and the IBTEs, where a similar postgraduate teaching role rather than a mentoring role predominates. The research questions were: how do the SBTEs position themselves in relation to student-teachers, colleagues and IBTEs? And how does this link to the professional learning that they have identified as occurring whilst they have been developing as SBTEs?

Initial findings from this data have been published (White, Dickerson and Weston 2015) focussing on the impact that this role had on SBTEs and some of the benefits and challenges they faced.

## **Research Methods**

### ***Research Participants***

This research was carried out in a University School of Education in England. All thirteen of the teacher tutors (SBTEs) engaged in the programme were invited to participate in the project. Eight tutors (62%) responded to an emailed questionnaire; three men and five women (Table 1). One respondent was a primary teacher and seven were secondary teachers. The respondents' prior experience included leadership roles within their school, or

across schools, in relation to professional learning; quality assurance of ITE; subject knowledge support and mentoring. Some had no prior experience in leading the professional learning of teachers/student-teachers. The respondents included teachers with each of the three SBTE 'sub-roles': teacher tutor (all); professional mentor; and teacher mentor (Table 1). From these eight respondents, five were selected as *'information-rich cases* for study in depth' using purposeful sampling (Patton 2002, p. 46, emphasis in original). The criterion for the selection of these five was that they were identified as participants from whom 'one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry' (Patton 2002, p. 230).

Two of the five teacher tutors took part in the telephone interview (Sofia and Mark). Two IBTEs who had worked closely with these SBTEs were interviewed face-to-face (Graeme and Jodie). Eight student-teachers were invited to a focus group to share their experiences as part of this first cohort of School Direct, being taught by both SBTEs and IBTEs. Four attended the focus group. In total, fourteen participants contributed to the research. As Patton (2002, p. 46) explains 'While one cannot generalize from single cases or very small samples, one can learn from them – and learn a great deal, often opening up new territory for further research...'

### ***Research Approach***

This research draws on a phenomenological approach to develop an understanding that involves sensitivity to the uniqueness of the participants and their particular situations (van Manen 2003). For this reason 'the closer the researcher is to the phenomenon under study, the more accurate and valid their interpretation is likely to be' (Davey 2013, p.34). In qualitative research, (Finlay 2002, p. 531) suggests that research is seen 'as a joint product of the participants, the researcher, and their relationship: it is co-constituted'. In this case the lead researcher, an IBTE, who leads the School Direct programme, had experience of working with the programme and the participants. The lead researcher played a significant role in the research design including the development of the data collection instruments, and in data analysis and interpretation. Researchers unknown to the participants conducted the interviews and focus group in order to reduce any impact that a perceived imbalance of power between the lead researcher and the participants might have on the research.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

Data were collected using self-completion questionnaires; semi-structured interviews of selected teacher educators; and a focus group involving student-teachers. The questionnaire and cover email were piloted before sending it to the SBTEs. The responses were used to develop the questions for the interviews with SBTEs. Again, the interview schedule was piloted and the findings used to revise the questions. Finally, the interview schedule was adapted for use with the IBTEs. The participants' were asked about who should be involved in preparing teachers; the multiple roles held by teacher educators in their workplace; their role as a teacher tutor (SBTE only), or supporting a teacher tutor (IBTE only); professional learning for the role of SBTE; benefits of the role; conflicts of interest/complementarity of roles held by the participant; and their sense of professional identity as a teacher educator (SBTE only). Open-ended questions were used to obtain data that would emphasise 'the meanings, experiences, and views of all the participants' (Pope and Mays 1995, p. 43). The interviews were recorded and partially transcribed to develop 'key points' that included some text as paraphrase/note form as well as verbatim quotations.

The interview findings were compared to the questionnaire responses and the focus group discussion. Consistencies between the data supported the trustworthiness of the responses (Yin 2009). The interviews were planned with the intention to benefit all involved (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007). The nature of the questions and the desire to build a mutually safe and supportive environment gave interviewees some power over what was discussed.

The lead researcher repeatedly read the data texts, initially grouping the data according to areas of questioning before carrying out 'categorizing analysis' (Maxwell 2013, p. 107). During the first stage of categorization, data relevant to each of the categories derived from the research question (positioning, professional learning, and professional skills development) were highlighted for closer scrutiny. These categories served as 'organizational categories' that were useful for sorting the data that were of interest for further investigation (Maxwell 2013, p. 107). Following this preliminary sorting, the highlighted data were explored in greater depth and placed into 'substantive categories', which were 'primarily *descriptive*' and closely related to the data (Maxwell 2013, p. 108, emphasis in original). The process of repeatedly re-visiting the data led to new insights emerging.

## Results

### ***The Positioning of SBTEs***

As all of the SBTEs are situated in the school where they work as a first-order practitioner, both how they position themselves in relation to others who are involved in teacher education (reflexive positioning); as well as how others position them (interactive positioning) (Davies and Harre 1990) was considered. The reflexive position expressed by all of the SBTEs who were also working as a mentor was that of mentor (Table 1) [[Insert Table 1 near here](#)]. This could correlate with the role of coach identified by Lunenberg, Dengerink, and Loughran (2014) as one aspect of being a teacher educator. In Sofia's interview she shared that it is 'hard to differentiate it [working as a teacher tutor] from having been a mentor for [X] years'. From the questionnaires and interviews, all the SBTEs were focussed on meeting the learning needs of the student-teachers. Those who were mentors as well as leading academic aspects of the programme did not distinguish the academic leadership as separate from mentoring whilst identifying themselves with the familiar title and position of 'mentor'.

Peter and Sara did not appear to position themselves beyond being a mentor. However, all of the other SBTEs also positioned themselves as a learner *from* and *with* the student-teachers (Table 1), which may reflect an inquiry approach to teaching teachers. This was coupled with positioning themselves at the forefront of new knowledge through their involvement in ITE. This is illustrated by:

'as a teacher I have gained a great deal from watching new teachers in the classroom and have used lots of ideas I have seen.' (Tracy)

'The opportunities are endless as it keeps you at the forefront of teacher training and therefore new ideas. Trainees often experiment greatly during their training year with different methods and skills they have gained from other teacher observations and

research. I feel that perhaps I started to teach in exactly the same way all of the time and fell into the 'comfortable trap' that is so easy to follow. Mentoring does not allow this as you constantly observe others and therefore are far more critical and reflective of your own teaching.' (John)

Those same SBTEs positioned themselves as a complementary partner to IBTEs (Table 1) which links to the role of broker identified by Lunenberg, Dengerink and Loughran (2014). For example:

'I can see the benefit of both University tutors and practising teachers. The experience of University staff is invaluable, and adds to the academic rigour of the course, however, practising teachers are more likely to be able to add more personal advice based on their experiences, and may be able to challenge the literature because of this.' (Pooja)

There was a sense in which SBTEs were 'gate keepers' who could invite peers to benefit from professional learning experiences by involvement with student-teachers (Table 1). Francesca did not position herself as a gate-keeper which may have been because she was working in a primary setting. John illustrated that his work benefitted his school through:

'passing on ideas and theory during inset/meetings... It encourages the whole department to take note of the way in which they deliver information and engage learners'.

Sofia planned learning opportunities for the student-teacher which she delegated to other colleagues, to broaden the feedback that the student-teacher received. There were indications that SBTEs were gate-keepers for learning opportunities for student-teachers. The term 'gate-keeper' has been used with respect to learning opportunities rather than in terms of entry into the profession, unlike Lunenberg, Dengerink and Loughran (2014).

Although Peter and Sara did not indicate that they were gate-keepers of professional learning opportunities this does not mean that they are not positioning themselves in this way, because the themes arose from the data rather than through direct questioning about these aspects. If differences in positioning do exist, these may be due to differences in prior experience, understanding of the role and confidence in carrying it out. This has implications for the professional learning needs of SBTEs.

In terms of interactive positioning, both SBTEs interviewed were seen as key in developing their subject in school. Sofia felt viewed as a 'go to person' by newly qualified teachers in school regarding their professional development. The school governors and senior leadership team valued the role of Mark in the programme as 'raising the profile of the school and supporting the community'. Graeme saw the SBTE as a subject specialist and a colleague with whom to negotiate a suitable programme and invaluable to 'bounce ideas off'. The SBTEs felt that the student-teachers valued them, and this was backed up by the IBTEs working with them and the student-teachers themselves. The student-teachers appreciated the enthusiasm that the SBTEs had for their training and the subject. They valued their

availability, approachability and their understanding of the workplace context. They saw them as insightful practitioners working to support their subject knowledge development. The IBTEs were positioning themselves in a quality assurance role with respect to the subject and professional support provided by the SBTEs 'ensuring the training was providing the right amount of challenge and support' for the student-teachers (Jodie). They also recognised their role as critical friend to the SBTEs, balancing support, encouragement and challenge, to ensure the student-teachers can succeed.

The student-teachers felt that SBTEs generally had autonomy, but that the senior leadership team was often unaware of how much SBTEs do. However the SBTEs did not share this perspective, one commenting that the senior leadership team valued this role because it raised the profile of the school, supported the school community and helped with recruitment of appropriate subject specialists for the future. Mark commented that 'the wider community like the governors have been quite receptive to what's going on' and that it had been noticed that his involvement in ITE had caused his subject to develop quickly within the school.

### ***Professional Learning of SBTEs***

The SBTEs were developing complex new skills beyond those required as a teacher (Table 2) [Insert Table 2 near here]. All could be attributed to working solely as a mentor, suggesting that professional learning associated with the teacher tutor role may need to be formalised, covering such aspects as explicit modelling, articulating tacit knowledge and underlying theory.

Some of the ways that the SBTEs recognised that they were learning professionally included:

- workshops for teacher educators facilitated by the HEI;
- preparing with an IBTE;
- reflecting on their own substantial teaching experience;
- the experience of leading the learning of the student-teacher.

## **Discussion**

### ***The Positioning of SBTEs***

Figure 1 [Insert Figure 1 near here] shows the two orders of working in ITE: first-order where the student-teacher and SBTE are teaching pupils and second-order (teaching teachers) traditionally held by IBTEs (Murray and Male 2005) but also by SBTEs through mentoring and/or tutoring. Mentoring spans the first and second-order because it requires first-order expertise to guide student-teachers' development. This illustrates the multiplicity of roles that experienced teachers adopt. Where SBTEs worked as mentors they assumed the reflexive position of mentor. This role was familiar to them and their colleagues, whereas the added dimension of leading the academic learning of student-teachers was a new dimension. The SBTEs who did not currently have the role of mentor did not position themselves in this way. The positioning as a mentor may reflect a reticence to embrace being a teacher tutor, or a difficulty in dis-entangling the two roles. The tendency towards being positioned as 'mentor', even whilst new aspects of the role were being acquired, could restrict their wider development as teacher educators and cause them to rely on practical wisdom rather than public knowledge (Boyd 2014). As a counterbalance, in this particular programme, the

SBTEs were working in close partnership with an IBTE, so that student-teachers were having opportunities to learn from a wide range of experienced practitioners.

The sense of being 'gate-keepers' with respect to learning opportunities between teachers and student-teachers in school illustrates the high value that the SBTEs place on both the learning of the student-teachers and the worth they see in being able to learn *from* and *with* them. It also reflects a sense of care for the professional learning environment for student-teachers and for their colleagues. In their study of a professional development school partnership, Ikpeze et al. (2012) recognised that the SBTEs (in this case as mentors) acted as critical bridges in the partnership between the student-teachers and the IBTEs. Here we find that SBTEs are negotiating another go-between role between the student-teachers and colleagues in school.

As Ikpeze et al. (2012) suggested, rapid change in the nature of partnerships of ITE can challenge effective collaboration among all stakeholders. In this research on a small scale pilot within the new School Direct route into teaching, working during a time of rapid change, there is evidence that some of the SBTEs are positioning themselves as complementary partners alongside the IBTEs, which is a positive indication of collaboration between the partners. The SBTEs see themselves as being at the forefront of developing professional knowledge in teaching. Providing opportunities for SBTEs and IBTEs to work alongside each other and to learn from one another is beneficial for developing new ways of working and to enhance the partnership between school and institution. Mark commented that when IBTEs and SBTEs are working alongside each other, the SBTE 'widens the knowledge and capability' of the IBTE, as well as the SBTE benefitting from the experience and knowledge of the IBTE. Sofia and Mark both felt that their work as an SBTE was valued in their schools, which was not confirmed unanimously by the IBTEs. The student-teachers felt the SBTEs were under-valued in school for the second-order aspects of their work. These findings are ambiguous and may reflect the lack of formal recognition of this work.

### ***Professional Learning of SBTEs***

The SBTEs interviewed were becoming aware of differences between working with pupils and with student-teachers. The content of their teaching shifted from the school curriculum to learning teaching, bringing similar challenges as those experienced by new IBTEs undergoing the transition from being a first-order practitioner to a second-order practitioner (Field 2012). The intricacies of the work of a SBTE are beyond being a good teacher and include harmonising the demands of developing another professional (O'Dwyer and Atli 2014).

Modelling good practice is integral to mentoring; however it is possible that these teacher tutors may not be explicitly modelling their practice to the student-teachers. This is a complex competency for second-order practitioners to develop (Loughran and Berry 2005), where IBTEs could use their understanding to support the professional learning of SBTEs, for example, through the collaborative mentoring approach developed by van Velzen et al. (2012). This approach can support quality and depth of learning of student teachers in school and provides a way for SBTEs to explicitly model and scaffold learning for student-teachers whilst co-teaching a cycle of lessons.

### **Conclusions**



The experience of the teachers in taking on the responsibility for some of the academic aspects of student-teachers' learning warrants our attention as school-based teacher education is increasing. Experienced teachers involved in teacher education are predominantly working as mentors, but more will be developing further as second-order practitioners, whilst maintaining their position as first-order practitioners within their school (Figure 1). This research raises important considerations regarding the impact of executing the role of mentor and academic tutor simultaneously. In considering how the SBTEs position themselves and other individuals involved in the programme and how IBTEs, student-teachers and others position them, we have found indications of collaborative working, reflected in the sense of being complementary partners. However, where these teachers are working as mentors, the tendency towards being positioned as 'mentor' by themselves and by their student-teachers, even whilst new aspects of the role are being acquired, could restrict the development of these SBTEs. As 'reflexive positions are always emerging, changing, and shifting' (Moghaddam 1999, p.77), this positioning of these SBTEs may be a temporary phase whilst they embrace both the role of mentor and teacher tutor simultaneously. Job descriptions would help formalise these positions in school-based teacher education. Without formal recognition much may be expected of these SBTEs, masking the true cost. The European Commission (2013, p.10) realised that 'failing to define teacher educators' roles and the competencies they require ... can be barriers to educational improvement'. Where complementary relationships are developing, the challenge of sharing responsibility can be explored to strengthen the partnership. This could help to overcome the fragmentation felt by some in the teacher educator community.

Teacher educators situated in HEIs and teachers situated in school may have different values and attitudes about teaching and teacher education which might lead to importance being given to alternative perspectives (Caspersen 2013). Efforts to bring together professional learning in the academic aspects of the programme with those in the school experience involve 'a shift in the epistemology of teacher education from a situation where academic knowledge is seen as the authoritative source of knowledge about teaching to one where different aspects of expertise that exist in schools and communities are brought into teacher education and coexist on a more equal plane with academic knowledge' (Zeichner 2010, p. 95). Through utilising the complementary strengths of IBTEs and SBTEs to educate student-teachers 'new synergies are created through the interplay of knowledge from different sources' (Zeichner 2010, p.95).

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**Table 1. The participants, roles and positioning**

Teacher Educator		Age phase	Professional roles		Teacher tutor	Positioning			
						Mentor	Learning <i>from</i> and <i>with</i> student-teacher	Complementary partner	Gate-keepers of professional learning opportunities
Francesca	SBTE	Primary	-	Mentor	1:1	*	*	*	
Peter	SBTE	Secondary	Subject Leader	Mentor	1:1	*			
Sara	SBTE	Secondary	Subject Leader	Mentor	1:1	*			
Sofia	SBTE	Secondary	Subject Leader	Mentor	1:1	*	*	*	*
John	SBTE	Secondary	Subject Leader	Mentor	Group	*	*	*	*
Tracy	SBTE	Secondary	-	Mentor	Group	*	*	*	*
Mark	SBTE	Secondary	Subject Leader	-	Group		*	*	*
Pooja	SBTE	Secondary	-	-	Group		*	*	*

**Table 2. Developing the skills of second-order practitioners**

Developing skills identified:	Comments
Lesson observation and feedback	'I enjoy watching others teach and identifying strengths and areas of improvement. It has helped me to be more involved in observations at school' (Sara)
Difficult conversations and dealing with concerns	Having a student-teacher who is a cause for concern can be a 'valuable experience in supporting them back on track' (John)
Being a critical friend	'Need to be challenging but being challenging to a grown-up who is clever and an equal' (Sofia)
Modelling good practice	I see my role as 'modelling good practice' (Sofia)
Developing subject knowledge and pedagogy	Appreciation that 'the way you look at things you need to break down in a lot more depth' to help the student-teachers to learn (Mark)
Brokering learning opportunities	'I often act as a broker between trainees and other teachers who could learn from each other' (Tracy)
Working with adult learners	Seeing them as 'academic equals/peers' (Sofia)

Figure 1. The roles of teacher educators

<b>Position</b>	<b>STUDENT TEACHER</b>	<b>SBTE</b>	<b>SBTE</b>	<b>IBTE</b>
<b>JOB TITLE</b>		<b>Mentor</b>	<b>Teacher Tutor</b>	
<b>First-order practice</b>	<b>Teaching pupils</b>	<b>Teaching pupils (Subject leading)</b>	<b>Teaching pupils (Subject leading)</b>	
		<b>MENTORING</b>	<b>MENTORING</b>	
<b>Second-order practice</b>			<b>Teaching teachers</b>	<b>Teaching teachers</b>

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